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J. R. R. Tolkein's "Hobbit" books intrigue students, perhaps because the fantasies lack "literary pretensions." "The Hobbit" and the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy, set in Middle Earth (a world peopled with Hobbits, Dwarves, and Elves), provide a history for the Elven language invented by the linguist Tolkein. In the story of the quest of the forces of good to destroy a power-giving ring which corrupts the one who wears it, students easily recognize the central theme--the corruptive tendency of power. Although the Romantic Quest is important, the trilogy is an epic in which the conflict between good and evil is clear and definite. Readers who discover deeper meanings as well as those who enjoy simple fantasy will find satisfaction in the stories and may, thus, be led to an interest in other books. (JS)

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'Hobbit' Books Make Good Reading ☆☆

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Mention casually in class one day that you're reading a book about Hobbits; then stand back and see if you haven't started something exciting. Or, better still, be reading one of the J. R. R. Tolkein books as the class comes in and put it aside reluctantly when the bell rings. This should have several of them demanding to know what are Hobbits anyway and what could you be reading that is so interesting and where can they get a copy. If you've already sold your librarian on hardback editions or if you have the paperbacks to lend, the rest is easy. I have found the fantasies to be irresistible to high school students, even the usually reluctant ones. Students who grimly fought anything else I offered in the way of literature have surrendered to Tolkein.

Perhaps it has worked so well because I have kept him out of the formal classroom, preferring casual discussions with students who are reading him. Although *The Hobbit* is of convenient length, it will not be adult enough in tone for most high school classes. The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, while certainly worthy of study, is probably too long and complex for the time most of us have to devote to it. One could teach the first book of the trilogy in class and let students continue the journey through Middle Earth as they wish. Certainly teachers will have their own ideas on this matter.

But my main reason for avoiding class study is not related to length or style: I would hate to rob the fantasies of their charm by association with "real" literature. As it is, the books carry some of the thrill of the forbidden — a kind of under-the-counter feeling we Tolkein readers share which might be spoiled by respectability.

Fantasies Entertain

There is an absence of any "literary" pretensions in the books. They are frankly fantasies, intended only to entertain. They are not — the author emphatically states — allegorical. More delightful still, they are not concerned with poverty, racial strife or the bomb; in fact, they take place in a land called Middle Earth, which none of us has seen and only Tolkein could help us imagine. Of course, Middle Earth has its problems and the skilled reader will see relationships to modern ones, despite Tolkein's disavowal of allegory. But the reader who does not can still find meaning and pleasure in Tolkein's carefully constructed world.

Tolkein, a Cambridge don and friend of C. S. Lewis and W. H. Auden, built his world for an interesting reason: As a linguist, he had invented an Elf language, and the books provide a history for his Elven tongue. The popularity of *The Hobbit*, published in 1937, encouraged him to expand the story in the Rings trilogy.

The recent publication of all the books in paperback (incidentally, there is an authorized and an unauthorized paperback publisher) primed a Tolkein fad in the colleges which is spreading to the secondary schools. Recent articles in *Esquire* and the *Saturday Evening Post* tell of Tolkein discussion clubs and literary journals, of graduate theses on the books, and of graffiti in subways and elsewhere proclaiming "Frodo Lives." One can buy buttons with that stirring slogan in English or in Elvish runes. The books have replaced such college favorites as *Catcher in the Rye* and *Lord of the Flies* on the college best seller lists.

Rings Trilogy

All of the books involve The Quest and the Rings of Power. In *The Hobbit*, Bilbo Baggins, a quiet little creature, goes on a quest to restore the dragon-held kingdom of the Dwarves and finds a ring on his journey. Gandalf, the wizard, who engineers many of the events in all the books, begins to suspect it is the One Ring, forged in ancient days and having the power to bind all of Middle Earth under its owner's domination. Sauron, the Dark Lord of Mordor, learns of the ring and wants it.

Hobbits are simple folk, half the size of men, who desire only to enjoy the comforts of their homes. Because of their simplicity, they play a leading role in the fate of the Ring, for Gandalf knows the Ring can corrupt more sophisticated and ambitious beings. So Bilbo is allowed to return to the Hobbit Shire with his ring, knowing only that it has the power to make him invisible. The style of *The Hobbit* is simpler than the books which follow and easier for the younger reader.

The *Lord of the Rings* begins when Gandalf sees the Dark Lord closing in on the Shire and decides the Ring must be destroyed in the fires which forged it, those of a volcano located within the Dark Lord's kingdom of Mordor. Since Bilbo is too old for this quest, his nephew and heir, Frodo, becomes the ringbearer.

The first book, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, tells of the gathering of nine representatives of the forces of good in Middle Earth—four Hobbits, two Men, a Dwarf, an Elf, and Gandalf. They begin their journey as the Dark Lord's influence spreads ever farther in the land.

The second, *The Two Towers*, tells of the scattering of the fellowship and their separate adventures. Frodo and his friend Samwise are guided to Mordor by a creature named Gollum, who is a former possessor of the Ring and has been ruined by his lust for it. Gollum knows nothing of their plan to destroy it and hopes to recover it by treachery. Other members of the company are involved in the defeat of Saruman, a wizard also perverted by the Ring, and the mustering of armies to fight the Dark Lord. We learn that one of the men in the fellowship is, by right of inheritance, King of Middle Earth.

In the final book, *The Return of the King*, the great battle is fought. The weary Hobbits return to the Shire to find the wizard Saruman has taken it over, and they must deal with this final problem without the help of Gandalf and the others.

Any attempt to capsulize the important events and characters is doomed to failure; indeed, one of the delights of Tolkein is his complexity. This is the story of a world and an age, and there are many things about it to tell. Though the reader is aided by maps, geneologies, histories and linguistic explanations, Middle Earth cannot be absorbed at a reading. It must be studied, pondered, discussed and reread. And so I have had discussions with students about such matters as the lineage of the Elves and the language of the Ents.

There are those who claim nothing more for the fantasies than that they make a good yarn. Granted, there are few narratives more exciting. But this is rich ore, no matter what the reader is digging for, and the "deep readers" will find their satisfaction here too.

Romantic Quest Theme

The theme of the corruptiveness of power is central, and is easily seen by young readers. They know that the temptation to use the Ring reaches even innocent Frodo, and that greed to possess it causes thousands to die. Gandalf refuses care of the Ring, even though he is the most powerful of the company, because he knows he would be too sorely tempted. Its power reaches several others of the company before the quest is ended.

The Romantic Quest itself is worth noting. Teachers of British Literature may compare Tolkein's to examples of the medieval romance. The women in Tolkein are as ethereal and symbolic as any of the later romance heroines. There is a great deal of poetry throughout the books which is like the folk ballads and other narrative poems of the Middle Ages.

But the trilogy is really more of an Epic than a Romance. The survival of good in the world is at stake, and the events in the books change the whole history of Middle Earth.

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Tolkein Trilogy Useful

Some will see in these events parallels with modern history, although, I repeat, Tolkein denies it. The Dark Lord Sauron and his terror tactics make one think of the Fascist powers; Saruman's false promises of economic equality are reminiscent of the Russian and Chinese revolutions. The Hobbits seem to represent the simple values and moral strength of the peasant, the Dwarves the ambition for wealth of the Middle Class, and the Elves the brilliance and responsibility of an idealized aristocracy. And it's difficult to avoid comparing the Ring to the Bomb.

All of this is unnecessary, unless it pleases the individual reader. Tolkein's world is not an allegory for our world because it doesn't need to be; it is complete in itself. It is so complete that the reader may lose himself in it. This opportunity to escape helps explain the Tolkein boom.

There is also the clear conflict which exists in the books. The War of the Rings pits good against evil and there is no question which is which. The reader may lust for the downfall of Sauron in a way which is not fashionable in modern affairs. The relativity of good and evil has no place here. One does not conciliate or negotiate with Sauron because one knows he is ever deceitful. I suspect this clear moral conflict is a relief to a generation nurtured on the thin broth of twentieth century values.

Linguistic Aspects

The linguistic aspects of the books will fascinate some students. Tolkein discusses the Elvish influences on Westron or Common Speech as seriously as if he were speaking of the influence of Latin on English. For that matter, the comparison is valid. Students who care little about the development of their own language can see the same principles at work on a language which intrigues them. They can learn, for example, that Hobbit is a corrupted form of an old Westron word, *Holbytla*, meaning hole-builder.

Hobbits have no language of their own, having learned to adopt the speech of whatever land they inhabit. The Elves speak High Elvish, an ancient and poetic tongue, or Gray Elvish, a conversational version. The Dwarves have a secret language of their own. Ents, the most ancient race, speak an ornate and terribly complicated language which only their long lives and quick minds allow them to learn. Orcs, the servants of Mordor, speak a Black Speech invented by Sauron. But the Lingua Franca of all Middle Earth is Westron, the language of Men. All of this is explained in great detail both in the text and in indexes for readers who want to know more.

Almost every reader does want to know more, and Tolkein aims to please. Not only are there the books mentioned earlier; there are also *The Tolkein Reader* and *The Silmarillion*, a forthcoming continuation of the Epic of Middle Earth.

So the initiate of 1967 may look forward to years of enjoyment in Middle Earth, none of it practical, at least on the surface. He will be able to get a job without it, find a mate without it, do nearly anything without it. I contend, though, that he will be much more with it.

For one thing, the love of Middle Earth is contagious. If we can be fascinated by the Elven tongue, why not Latin, or French, or English? If we can care deeply about the restoration of the Shire, why not freedom anywhere? If we can lose ourselves in one book, why not another, and another?

Encourage Reading

But even if the experience proves not to be transferable — indeed, then most of all — the books are to be cherished. To some readers, it may be the only books they ever loved. How wonderful, then, to have loved them.

The English teacher has, I believe, a splendid chance here — first to know the books himself, then to share their treasure with students. For some students, it may be the imaginative experience of a lifetime.

My wife recently acquired the "Hobbit habit." Stealing a few minutes with *The Hobbit* the other day in her junior high library, she noticed a girl looking curiously at her. Finally, the girl approached and said, *"I* read *that*. That's a *good* book," as if to ask, "Why are you reading it?" The girl was right; it is a good book. And I think it's time we recognized and took advantage of its appeal.

Two New Books Honor FCTE Editor

A new book, *Not For Glory, What Makes a Great Teacher?*, written by William Jeremiah Burke, devotes four pages to Mrs. Mabel Staats, teacher of creative writing, English and journalism at Southwest Miami High School. Mr. Burke interviewed her when she was named Florida Teacher of the Year in 1963 and subsequently was among the top ten in the nation honored by the U.S. Office of Education.

She is also one of the few women whose activities are included in the new volume of the Encyclopedia of American Biography, along with an article about her late husband, Dr. J. Riley Staats, Chairman of the Geography Department, University of Miami.